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ROLLER COASTER ROULETTE

THIS IS a time of year when the public is more worried about accidents at ski resorts than at amusement parks. But the safety of roller coasters and their like was the subject of two reports released last week by an industry organization that is trying to fend off federal oversight of their daredevil attractions.

With rides sporting names like "The Mind Eraser," the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions is well advised to have researchers look periodically at the brain-jarring effects of the high-speed thrill machines. But the public would be more reassured if the research, which found the rides to be safe, had not been done at the behest of the industry. A non-industry-sponsored analysis of brain injuries on roller coasters is being done by the Brain Injury Association of America. The federal government would have a role in ride safety if US Representative Edward J. Markey of Malden could get lawmakers to pass his National Amusement Park Ride Safety Act.

It is a safe bet that the millions of parents who entrust their children and occasionally themselves to amusement park rides assume that their safety is being monitored by the federal government, much as it oversees the safety of bicycles. That has not been the case, however, since 1981, when the industry got Congress to exempt fixed-site rides from the purview of the Consumer Product Safety

Commission. The rides operated by itinerant carnivals are still monitored by the CPSC.

Some states require parks to report accidents and make changes to reduce unsafe situations. But there is no way to ensure that problems detected in a ride in one state are also corrected in other states where the ride is used. Last year, the industry trade group began national accident reporting, but its system is voluntary, the reports are not made until the end of each season, and there is no mechanism for immediate correction of problems nationwide.

The CPSC has an indirect way of knowing how many amusement park riders are being injured, and the frequency of these accidents is increasing as park attendance grows. The agency collects data from 100 hospital emergency rooms around the country to maintain a general sense of what products or activities pose special dangers. It estimates that in 2001, fixed-site rides were responsible for 6,704 injuries serious enough to require a hospital visit, an increase of 25 percent over 1997. There were three deaths in 2001 compared with one in 2000 and six in 1999.

Clearly the rides do present certain hazards. It is equally clear that the best way to minimize them is through oversight by the CPSC, which could track problems with certain rides, require changes in their operation and make sure that parks in other states comply with the safer practices.